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Eating as One? Dutch Mennonite Anti-sacramental Response to the 1982 WCC Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry Report

Iris Speckmann

Introduction

In 1982, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches published a report on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (hereafter *BEM*), describing what the Commission then saw as ecumenical convergence on three ecclesiological matters that had divided churches for centuries. The WCC asked its member churches to offer responses “from the highest appropriate level of authority” on the extent to which each could recognize “the faith of the Church through the ages” in the text of *BEM*. Churches were asked to answer “as precisely as possible” and to organize a process of reception among their respective constituencies.¹ As a WCC member, the Dutch General Mennonite Society² gave a response that can be characterized as a searing critique of the sacramental language of the report, particularly the section on the Eucharist.

Although a sense of anti-sacramentality was not uncommon among Mennonite theologians, I want to problematize it in this essay. I will take the discourse between *BEM* and the Dutch Mennonite response on the Lord’s Supper as the point of departure for a reflection on the usability of sacramental language in Mennonite theology. At a time when Mennonite theologians (at least in North America) are reevaluating the theological usefulness of such language, a review of Dutch Mennonite anti-sacramental reasoning in its *BEM* response will expose some undesirable theological consequences of their view. For the purpose of this re-evaluation and future theological thinking, I will proceed in three steps.

¹ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* [*BEM*]. Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: WCC, 1982), preface, vi, viii. View the document at <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text>.

² In Dutch: Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit (ADS).

First, I review the discourse between *BEM* and the Dutch Mennonite response, with respect to both the theological content and the rhetorical moves that are made. Using the technique of close reading—a tool of rhetorical discourse analysis³—keeps my interpretation sensitive to the fact that these two texts not only *say* something but also *do* something. Functioning within the network of ecumenical relationships, they are diplomatic, political texts that try to assert doctrinal power and thereby influence their readers. Whereas *BEM* tries to build an ecumenical identity, portraying itself as a record of growing convergence of WCC member churches, the Mennonite response fences off its own identity from this alleged consensus. Awareness of this rhetorical tactic allows me to take a step back from doctrinal presumptions, whether ecumenical or Mennonite, and to see through a phenomenological lens what happens in the discourse. After reviewing both documents, I further reflect on the Dutch Mennonite response from a systematic theological perspective, showing how a radical non-sacramentality is problematic in light of the eucharistic understanding of the early Anabaptists, and suggesting the theological consequences of this understanding. Lastly, I argue that conceptions of sacramentality help to articulate God's involvement in the Lord's Supper. Illustrating how sacramental theology has developed since *BEM* was published, I show that these conceptions can help create a fuller understanding of the Supper for Mennonites, and that such an understanding is crucial for maintaining a sense of transcendence in a postmodern, post-secular, and post-Christian culture like that of the Netherlands.

I

A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF *BEM* AND THE DUTCH MENNONITE RESPONSE

Both *BEM* and the Dutch Mennonite response are part of a worldwide inter-confessional effort, ongoing for several decades, to reach a mutual understanding on key doctrinal issues of the Christian faith.⁴ Issues

³ Titus Hjelm, "Discourse Analysis," in *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Stausberg and Steven Engler (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 134-50.

⁴ The oldest drafts of *BEM* date to 1967. See Max Thurian, ed., *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Faith and Order Paper 116 (Geneva: WCC, 1983), 197.

surrounding baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church leadership (ministry) have divided churches for centuries and have even led to deadly violence between confessional branches. Against that background, *BEM* is a remarkable document of diplomacy that witnesses to an increasing convergence of former theological antipodes.

However, many theological and ecclesiological differences remain. Although *BEM* clearly describes some of them, the text also reflects tensions and compromises. When the Mennonite Church in the Netherlands received the report, it could have responded by staying close to the text, pointing to the tensions and delivering constructive feedback on how to move the dialogue forward. However, Dutch Mennonites replied with a critique, using the occasion to bring Mennonite identity into high relief by stressing that a Mennonite understanding is non-sacramental. On the whole, they showed little willingness to offer helpful comments or concrete suggestions for future conversation. Why was this? In what follows, I analyze what is happening within and between these two textual sources, focusing solely on the eucharistic sections of both documents where sacramental terminology receives the most attention.

Analysis of *BEM*

In the exchange between *BEM* and the Mennonite response, the issue clearly revolves around the notion of sacramentality. The *BEM* text uses the term "sacrament" as a matter of common parlance, while the Mennonite respondents characterize their view of baptism and the Eucharist as "non-sacramental." Focusing on the use of the word "sacrament" in *BEM*, one notices that the term in effect gets a definition in an introductory paragraph in the section on the Eucharist:

Consequently the Eucharist is a sacramental meal which by visible signs communicates to us God's love in Jesus Christ, the love by which Jesus loved his own "to the end" (John 13:1). It has acquired many names: for example, the Lord's Supper, the breaking of bread, the holy communion, the divine liturgy, the mass. Its celebration continues as the central act of the Church's worship.⁵

⁵ *BEM*, "Eucharist," no. 1, 8. In the text of this essay, I refer to the numbered paragraphs in *BEM* as "articles."

Sacraments, then, are “visible signs” that communicate to us “God’s love in Jesus Christ.” So far, this is similar to common definitions that see “sacrament” as “a (visible) sign of God’s (invisible) grace, wisdom, or love” (a common definition since the time of St. Augustine).⁶ This broad definition is very general and functional, stressing what the Supper *does*.⁷ However, the sacrament of the Eucharist is given prominence among other visible signs: it is “the central act of the Church’s worship.” This prominence is further emphasized throughout the report. Article 2, for instance, states that the Eucharist is in essence hosted by God:

In the eucharistic meal, in the eating and drinking of the bread and wine, Christ grants communion with himself. God himself acts, giving life to the body of Christ and renewing each member.⁸

Defined as a meal that God is hosting, the Eucharist becomes primarily the act of God and not a ritual in the hands of its participants. Further, this article states that Christ is granting communion with himself, which means he is an active presence during the Supper. This hosting by God and the presence of Christ is further elaborated in Article 13:

[T]he eucharistic meal is the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, the sacrament of his real presence. [...] Christ’s mode of presence in the eucharist is unique. [...] The Church confesses

⁶ For instance, Dorothea Sattler, “Sacrament,” in Erwin Fahlbusch et al., eds., *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 792-93.

⁷ The Eucharist appears to be characterized here in a neutral way—as a sign that “communicates.” “Communication” can denote that the Supper is merely a tool for God and people to use. But Mennonites should be alert as to how the communication takes place: Is the Supper, according to this text, just a sign that refers? Or does the ritual bring about Christ’s presence in a mechanical or automatic way? It is hard to read the word “communication” without recalling the long history of theological debate. Using the technique of close reading, I focus on the wording of the *BEM* text, postponing the question of what it could denote for Mennonite readers and bracketing Mennonite theological pre-understandings. As a sacrament, the Supper has the performative power to do something through the sharing of bread and wine that goes beyond mere sharing and eating. God’s love shines through the ritual in some way. The *BEM* text, at least in Article 13, is silent on where this performative power is located.

⁸ *BEM*, “Eucharist,” no. 2, 8.

Christ's real, living and active presence in the eucharist. While Christ's real presence in the eucharist does not depend on the faith of the individual, all agree that to discern the body and blood of Christ, faith is required.⁹

The prominence given the Eucharist comes to a climax in Article 13, which stresses that this mode of Christ's presence is unique. In addition, the Eucharist is interpreted as a ritual that can bring about Christ's presence *unconditionally*. Although there is a need "to discern the body and blood of Christ" and "faith is required," this dimension is not decisive. As God is host, the subjective disposition or intentionality of the recipients is of secondary importance. The performative potential of the sacrament is objectified here, attributing to it the power to bring about a presence of Christ that is "real, living and active" while downplaying the subjective dimension.

Unsurprisingly, problems arise within the ecumenical discourse exactly on this point, since stressing the objective dimension over the subjective dimension is a cause of painful and classic divisions among WCC member churches. The commentary on Article 13 shows that incompatible understandings are still not resolved:

Many churches believe that by the words of Jesus and by that power the Holy Spirit, bread and wine of the eucharist become, in a real though mysterious manner, the body and blood of the risen Christ, i.e., of the living Christ present in all his fullness. [...] some other churches, while affirming a real presence of Christ at the eucharist, do not link that presence so definitely with the signs of bread and wine. The decision remains for the churches whether this difference can be accommodated within the convergence formulated in the text itself [i.e., Article 13].¹⁰

Although this commentary acknowledges a divergence, the formulation is rhetorically striking. By using "many" and "some other," the writers make two rhetorical moves. First, they portray the convergence as identifying a conflict between two general positions. From a critical rhetorical perspective, one can ask if there were more positions than the two portrayed,

⁹ Ibid., no. 13, 10.

¹⁰ BEM, "Eucharist," no. 13, commentary, 10.

given the complexity of theologies and range of traditions represented in the WCC. Second, the “many ... some other” formulation subordinates one position to the other. How significant was the lack of consensus, and which theological positions were silenced in drafting the report? *BEM* lacks transparency by failing to show how many members of the Faith and Order Commission supported either position portrayed here.¹¹

Although these questions may seem to put too much stress on negligible subtleties in the text, I suggest¹² that some readers may have interpreted the “many . . . some” as disadvantaging their own position.¹³ If so, this could explain why the Dutch Mennonite response was quite fierce. Consider that in building up to Article 13, the Eucharist is ascribed a strong performative power to bring about Christ’s presence, which is attached to bread and wine. The Eucharist is called the most prominent act of worship, one in which Christ’s mode of presence is unique. If one is aware of how conflict about the Eucharist has been brewing over many centuries—and if one reads from a Mennonite perspective—it is hard not to interpret this formulation as restating the doctrine of transubstantiation or at least a form of sacramentalism, even though *BEM* takes pains to avoid such terms.¹⁴ Such a reading is even more tempting because this line of thinking actually appears in the main text: while Article 13 stresses that the Eucharist is “the sacrament of the real presence,” divergence of opinion is relegated to the

¹¹ Compare, for instance, the commentary on Article 15, where the lack of consensus is portrayed in more neutral categories (“some/others” instead of “many/some”). *BEM* shows signs of what critical discourse analysis calls “producing a hegemony” or “suppression of variety within the discussion.” See Hjelm, “Discourse Analysis,” 142.

¹² This might be a likelier possibility for readers from the smallest WCC member churches, such as the Dutch and German Mennonites. The Dutch Society of Friends made a similar critique, as did the Salvation Army. See Max Thurian, *Churches Respond to BEM*, Volumes I-VI (Geneva: WCC, 1986-1988).

¹³ “The main text demonstrates the major areas of theological convergence; the added commentaries either indicate historical differences that have been overcome or identify disputed issues still in need of further research and reconciliation.” *BEM*, preface, vii.

¹⁴ I define sacramentalism as “the type of thinking that regards the substance of salvation as a reality as enclosed in the means, so that appropriation is viewed as independent of conscious reception (faith), the mechanical effect upon a soul that is also thought of in terms of substance.” See Notger Slenczka, “Sacramentality,” in Fahlbusch et al., *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Vol. 4, 800-802.

accompanying commentary. Since the main text celebrates the supposed convergence, churches deviating from it are likely to feel disadvantaged—and likely to object.

The convergence presented in the *BEM* text collects a range of readings of sacramentality. In the beginning of the section on the Eucharist, the sacraments are generally defined as “visible signs of God’s love,” but later in Article 13 and the accompanying commentary they are no longer merely a medium for communicating God’s love. While “communication” implies a certain mutuality or at least an active receptivity, *BEM* now stresses God’s initiative and sovereignty—so that the Eucharist becomes almost a one-sided act of transference. The term “sacrament” now refers to a rather autonomous supernatural phenomenon having an objective performative power to transfer grace. It is portrayed primarily as an instrument for God to use, and it reduces the faithful recipients to passively accepting what is transferred to them.

Analysis of Dutch Mennonite Response

The Dutch Mennonites’ official response was written by two Mennonite Seminary teachers on behalf of the General Mennonite Society in the Netherlands. After opening with the statement that bringing reconciliation was the center of Jesus’ mission, thereby acknowledging the WCC’s efforts to work on theological convergence, the authors add this relativizing comment:

When we state that churches must consider themselves a uniting church engaged in a ceaseless struggle to resist through the powers of God’s Spirit all forces that carry with them and sustain division, it is our conviction that in this struggle definitive priority will have to be given to questions of peace and justice. We have noted that it is these questions that oppress the minds of a large number of members of the brotherhood. Simultaneously, the questions centering around baptism, eucharist and ministry appear to attract little attention. Rather, it is found that active Christians of different churches celebrate the Lord’s Supper together as a matter of course without worrying about denominational obstacles. They are obviously

not awaiting for a consensus of the eucharist.¹⁵

In other words, while the respondents appreciate the intent of the ecumenical effort, their relativizing rhetorical gesture suggests that doctrinal issues raised by *BEM* are less important to the Mennonite constituency than social justice. This can be read as an implicit critique of the whole ecumenical debate on sacramental theology, and at the very least the debate on the doctrine of the Eucharist. Where *BEM* states that the Eucharist is the central act of the church's worship, the respondents imply that this worship is found elsewhere, namely in being a peace and justice church. Rhetorically speaking, their introduction reframes the debate and suggests that more attention should be directed to issues of justice and peace than to doctrinal questions of sacramentality.

After this introduction, the authors discuss the three sections of *BEM* separately. However, instead of closely following the text, they elaborate on the meaning of the Lord's Supper from their Mennonite perspective. They explain that the Eucharist in their tradition is a matter of "keeping oneness."¹⁶ This phrase stresses that the ritual should be regarded "in the light of the work of God, who is liberating mankind [sic] from its rebellion against him and from the mutual opposition and strife which is the result of this rebellion, by joining people together in the new community of the congregation." Referring to Galatians 2:27ff, the authors depict God as the initiator of the reconciling and equalizing movement among peoples, and the congregation as a first bridgehead in the world where God's conciliating work is embodied and becomes concrete and visible:

[T]he congregation forms the specific part of the world that by virtue of God's conciliating and liberating work does not have to resign itself to being divided, but may consider itself empowered to resist division with all its strength and to distinguish itself from the world as a community of peace, a peace church. That it has been called and empowered to do this is expressed in its celebration of the Lord's Supper. This celebration should

¹⁵ "Response of the General Mennonite Society (Netherlands)" in Thurian, *Churches Respond to BEM*, Vol. III, 289-90.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 293.

therefore be seen—no different from the celebration of baptism—as an act of confession.¹⁷

That is, the Lord's Supper is less a celebration of God's reconciliation but more an act of confession by which the congregation confesses or commemorates its empowerment to resist division and to distinguish itself from the world as a peace church. The focus of this view is on *ecclesio*-logy more than on *theo*-logy: the Supper expresses the ecclesiology of a peace church.

Continuing this line of thinking, the respondents stress that a proper celebration of the Lord's Supper

puts pressure on the congregation to distinguish itself in the right way from the world as a city on a mountain. So wherever this does not happen, the question imposes itself whether Christ is present at that particular celebration.¹⁸

Here, they put decisive weight on the intentionality of the congregation and the necessity to discern how faith is lived out. However, whereas *BEM* minimizes subjective intentionality, the Mennonites stress it. The congregation is portrayed as acting out the ritual during this ceremony of confession. Although God through Christ initiates the reconciliation that made the community possible, his presence during the Supper is conditional on the commitment of the congregation to live up to its calling as a peace church.

Summarizing their argument, the authors state that their view of the Lord's Supper is non-sacramental:

Clearly this non-sacramental interpretation of [...] the Lord's Supper raises a number of questions on some of the formulations of the statement as well. When for instance par. 2 states: "In the eucharistic meal, in the eating and drinking of the bread and wine, Christ grants communion with himself. God himself acts, giving life to the body of Christ and renewing each member", we reserve to ourselves the right to interpret these kind of

¹⁷ "Response of the General Mennonite Society (Netherlands)" in Thurian, *Churches Respond to BEM*, Vol. III, 292.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 293.

pronouncements in light of the foregoing.¹⁹

Without elaborating on their view of sacramentality, the authors seem to believe that their exposition is sufficiently clarified by the use of the term “non-sacramental.” Following the argumentation of the text,²⁰ they point only to Article 2 as a specific instance where their reading might take a non-sacramental direction.

Because the authors’ view is not fully explicated, one can make only an educated guess on how to interpret this rhetorical move. From a traditional Mennonite perspective, one might think that their main objection would be to the notion that intentionality is not decisive for the performative power of the Lord’s Supper. Or they could be rejecting *BEM*’s characterization of the mode of Christ’s presence as “real, living and active.” Since the authors point to Article 2, their basic objection seems directed to the notion of Christ granting communion with himself, which might place him as a “real, living presence” or portray God as the main host. One must conclude that this is their key point against *BEM*’s conception of the sacramentality of the Eucharist. According to the Mennonite respondents, the Lord’s Supper is not so much a meal hosted by God as it is an act of confession by which, as I have already noted, the congregation expresses its empowerment and commitment to follow Jesus in his struggle against divisions. For the authors, it is not so much God as the congregation who is the main ritual actor. Christ might join the occasion, but this is not what they focus on. They stress the human side of the ritual.

While the respondents characterize the Eucharist as a non-sacramental act of confession, this characterization is problematic. On the one hand, it seems to describe accurately the eucharistic theology of the Mennonite document, because the Lord’s Supper is reduced to a ceremonial act of confession on the human side. It is not so much a “visible sign” that communicates God’s invisible grace, since God is not ascribed an active ritual role. On the other hand, one could claim this theology is indeed “sacramental,” since it illustrates the Mennonite tendency to shift sacramentality from the elements of bread and wine to the congregation itself: it is the congregation

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Again, I am using the close reading technique employed in critical rhetorical analysis. I seek to discern what is in the text and what is (surprisingly) absent.

that becomes the “visible sign” of God’s invisible involvement with people.²¹ Assembling around bread and wine, the reconciled alternative community becomes the immanent sign or paradigm of God’s invisible striving for reconciliation.

II

THE *BEM* RESPONSE IN A BROADER MENNONITE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Now we are in position to reflect further on the eucharistic theology emerging from the Mennonite response to *BEM* from a broader systematic theological perspective. Since the respondents claim their reaction is sufficiently representative of a Dutch Mennonite understanding of the issues that *BEM* is addressing, we can ask where this non-sacramental understanding comes from, whether it is consistent with historical Mennonite views, and whether it is consistent with prevailing 20th-century views. It is equally important to reflect on the consequences of a non-sacramental understanding of the Eucharist. Below I will argue that a non-sacramental interpretation is theologically limited.

Response to *BEM* and Eucharistic Theology of Early Anabaptists

Mennonites have often found the term “sacrament” to be problematic. For early Anabaptists such as Conrad Grebel, “sacrament” referred to the liturgical practices and theology of the church of his day. Perhaps the most illuminating comparison between the Dutch Mennonite response to *BEM* and early Anabaptist reflections on the Lord’s Supper is to the eucharistic theology of Balthasar Hubmaier. Interpretation of the Supper as an act of confession is equivalent to Hubmaier’s interpretation of it as a human “pledge.”²² While Hubmaier validated the word “sacrament,” he wanted to deconstruct its meaning, bringing back the earlier Latin understanding

²¹ C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1993), 351-63.

²² John Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Philips* (Waterloo, ON; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 44.

of the term as a military oath of loyalty.²³ Following this idea to its logical conclusion, the *BEM* respondents took his deconstruction a step further and framed their view of the act as non-sacramental. John Rempel's characterization of Hubmaier's view of the Supper as "a pledge to live out the grace previously given"²⁴ helps one interpret the Dutch response. However, there is also an important difference. Whereas Hubmaier focuses on the Supper as a human embodiment of Christ's self-giving and love within the intimacy of the congregation,²⁵ the *BEM* response reaches further outward, moving away from an intimate language of spiritual union of the inner circle towards a language of political and social responsibility and engagement.

This difference has consequences for conceiving God's ritual involvement with the Supper or God's participation during the Supper *in actu*. The Dutch response shows that emphasizing the Supper as an act of confession and the responsibility of the congregation "to distinguish itself in the right way from the world as a city on a mountain" results in overshadowing the Supper's spiritual and metaphysical dimensions. There is almost no elaboration of pneumatological or Christological aspects; the focus is on anthropological and ecclesiological responsibilities. This is why I characterize this theology as "eucharistic deism": although the authors acknowledge that God through Christ instituted the ceremony, it is as if God then retreated into a passive distance. If primarily characterized as an act of confession, the Supper seems to become only that—an expression of the congregation's intention to be a peace church, an act of ecclesiological self-expression.

As has been recognized in recent decades, not all early Anabaptists rejected the term "sacrament" or notions of sacramentality in their eucharistic theological reflections.²⁶ When investigating the several kinds of

²³ Wayne H. Pipkin and John Howard Yoder, trans. and eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA; Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1989), 391.

²⁴ Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 44.

²⁵ Hubmaier states that "bread and wine are word symbols of his love, by which we remember how he, Christ, was our Christ, and how we also are always to be Christ to one another" from "Several Theses Concerning the Mass," in Pipkin and Yoder, *Balthasar Hubmaier*, 75, and "a pledge of love ... that one Christian performs toward the other" in "A Christian Catechism," *ibid.*, 354.

²⁶ "Sacrament" in Harold S. Bender, ed., *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Volume IV (Scottsdale, PA:

sacramental theology within the broad Anabaptist movement, one realizes that the Dutch response to *BEM* could have been different if it had taken another stream of Mennonite tradition as its point of reference. For instance, Pilgram Marpeck did not object to using the term “sacrament.” Although he preferred “ceremonies” for internal discourse among Anabaptists,²⁷ he saw no objection to “sacrament” within inter-confessional debates or his own writings. He even dedicated a whole chapter of his “Admonition” of 1542 to “What the Word Sacrament Really Means and Is,”²⁸ in which he describes his view. This account might prove helpful if one wants to conceive of sacramentality in a way that is neither a restatement of sacramentalism nor a form of eucharistic deism. In a remarkably modern fashion,²⁹ Marpeck describes a sacrament as a symbolic exchange between God and human participants. With the ritual exchange of bread and wine, the covenant of friendship and love between God and humans is expressed, (re-)affirmed, and re-kindled. A sacrament involves mutuality: it stresses both sides of the exchange.

To show that Marpeck was not exceptionally sacramental among early Anabaptists, I contend that his description of sacramentality illuminates the eucharistic theology of Menno Simons. While furiously attacking the liturgical practices and theology of the church of his day, Simons still used the term “sacramental sign” for the Lord’s Supper.³⁰ Some say that he used the adjective “sacramental” in the same way as Hubmaier, accepting the reduced Latin meaning in which a sacrament was the military vow of a soldier, a seal

Mennonite Publishing House, 1959), 397.

²⁷ Ibid. See also Pilgram Marpeck, “Lord’s Supper” in Walter Klaassen et al. trans., *Later Writings by Pilgram Marpeck and His Circle*, Volume 1 (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999), 105.

²⁸ Pilgram Marpeck, “Admonition” (1542), in William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, ed. and trans., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Kitchener, ON; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978), 169-72.

²⁹ Marpeck’s understanding seems to be the 16th-century equivalent of the sacramental theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet. Compare, for instance, Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo Press, 1995), 108-109.

³⁰ Menno Simons, “Lord’s Supper,” from a *Fundamental and Clear Confession of the Poor and Distressed Christians* in J. C. Wenger, ed. and Leonard Verduin, trans., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1516* (Scottdale, PA; Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1956), 515.

of commitment to his lord.³¹ However, I am not convinced that Simons had this restricted meaning in mind, because there are more mystical notions in his eucharistic theology than there are in the Dutch Mennonite response to *BEM*. To be sure, the authors of the response are following in Simons's footsteps when they stress the intentionality of the assembled congregation as decisive for the spiritual quality of the Lord's Supper. Without the right spirituality of faith and discipleship, there can be no Supper, according to Menno. This stress on human intentionality, which points to a shared spiritual responsibility between human and divine participants, counters *BEM*'s over-emphasizing of God's sovereignty and the Eucharist as a one-sided communication or transference of God's grace. For Simons, as for other early Anabaptists, the harmony of the gathered body of Christ was a *sine que non* for the sacramentality of the Supper, in opposition to the then common theological position.³² However, Simons never took his protest against sacramentalism so far as to completely rule out the "sacramental sovereignty" of God, or to deny the Supper's potentiality to become a medium through which God and humans mutually and actively communicate.³³

Furthermore, Simons had a mystical view of the Eucharist that seems lost in the Dutch Mennonite response. By quoting Matthew 18:20, he acknowledges that Christ is mystically present during the Eucharist.³⁴ Although not explicitly portraying Christ as a host as *BEM* does, this mystical notion points to a presence of a strong quality³⁵ that is "real, living and active." While Simons rejects a sacramentalistic *ex opere operato* or mechanical transference of grace, he acknowledges the Eucharist's performative and

³¹ *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, IV, 397.

³² Simons, "Lord's Supper," 148.

³³ By "sacramental sovereignty" I mean the sovereignty by which God can communicate his presence by breaking into daily reality through earthly phenomena and things regardless of the disposition of people. Biblical examples include the burning bush (Exodus 3:2) and the cloud (Exodus 16:10).

³⁴ Matt. 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them," quoted by Simons. See Simons, "Lord's Supper," 148.

³⁵ This opposes the recent conclusion of Scott McKnight, "Menno Simons," in Justin S. Holcomb and David A. Johnson, *Christian Theologies of the Sacraments: A Comparative Introduction* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2017), 175-90. But it is in line with Joel Z. Schmidt, "The Challenge of Menno Simons' Symbolic View of the Lord's Supper" in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 6-26.

communicative potential to become more than a memorial, pledge, or act of confession.

Read this way, Simons's eucharistic oeuvre is more in line with Marpeck's view of the sacrament as a symbolic exchange than with Hubmaier's deconstruction of the sacrament as a purely human pledge, act of confession, or act of remembrance. Like Marpeck, Simons locates the sacramental performativity of the Lord's Supper ceremony in the act of people coming together in Christ's name. He describes the Supper as a gathering of a congregation that trustfully waits for a risen Christ to join the communion and the just, as he had promised. Through the promised mystical presence of Christ, the Supper becomes a focused, ritual moment, which Simons calls not only a "sacramental sign" but a "marriage feast."³⁶ Like Marpeck, he seems to interpret the Supper as a ritual encounter celebrating a covenant of love between God and loyal participants. In this reading, the Supper is indeed a sacrament, both in the common understanding where a sacrament denotes "a visible, signifying ritual act that communicates God's invisible love," and in the sense of Marpeck, who describes it as a moment of symbolic exchange of mutual love and friendship between God and faithful communicants. Marpeck's sacramental understanding of the Supper, then, is not exceptional.

This reflection on Anabaptist eucharistic theology of the 16th century suggests that there are at least two streams of thought on sacramentality: one radically deconstructs the sacramental understanding of the Lord's Supper, reducing the meaning of "sacrament" to a human pledge of loyalty and discipleship; the other interprets the Supper as a "sacramental" symbolic exchange between God and human in which Christ's spiritual presence or God's grace and love becomes tangible. The Dutch response to *BEM* has strong historical roots in the first stream but little affinity with the second.

³⁶ Simons, "Lord's Supper," 148. My reading challenges former interpretations of Simons that deny, for instance, the mystical implications of his bridal imagery. Although I build on Schmidt's case for regaining sacramentality, I disagree with his denial of the presence of mystical notions within Simons's thinking (see Schmidt, "The Challenge of Menno Simons' Symbolic View," 13). When Simons writes about the Supper as a bridal feast, his style becomes lyrical in a way that is difficult to interpret as anything other than mystical. Simons clearly thinks of the Supper as a moment of intensified intimacy between Christ and his bride, the congregation.

Consequences of a Non-sacramental Understanding of the Lord's Supper

From a Mennonite perspective, the ethical dimension of the Lord's Supper is key to its quality: by sharing the Supper, the gathering of disciples enfleshes the other-worldly ethics that Christ embodied. The harmony of the congregation is decisive for any possibility that the ritual might become "sacramental," an event of intensified spiritual intimacy in which Christ becomes re-presented or where divine presence becomes tangible. This stress on the ethical dimension is a common feature of Mennonite eucharistic theology—not only in Simons, Marpeck, and Hubmaier but also in more contemporary Mennonite theologians.³⁷ Arguably, *BEM* put the horse ahead of the cart by placing metaphysical, doctrinal issues at the front and ethics at the very end of the eucharistic section.³⁸ Because *BEM* stressed the Eucharist as the central act of worship, underlining the objective dimension, the Dutch Mennonite respondents saw no alternative but to emphasize the subjective dimension, in which the participants' commitment to be a peace church becomes conditional for Christ to be present. However, both *BEM* and the response are problematic when examined from a broader theological perspective.

First, the reasoning by which human intentionality is conditional for God's potential to reveal himself is an unbiblical denial of God's sacramental sovereignty. From a biblical perspective, God can reveal himself through earthly means or events, wherever and however he pleases, whether we are in harmony or not. Second, the *BEM* respondents overstate human responsibilities. In their argument, the congregation is portrayed as a realized *eschaton* that must live up to the high ethical standard of the Kingdom of

³⁷ See Pieter Post, "Maintaining Unity in Faith: Toward a Theological Link between Baptism, Foot Washing and the Lord's Supper," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, Fall 2005, 67-76; Duane K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City. An Anabaptist Theology of Culture* (Waterloo, ON; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 145-49; John Howard Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer," in Michael G. Cartwright, ed., *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Waterloo, ON; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 364-66.

³⁸ Mennonites were not alone in this critique, which relates to the tension between the two commitments of the ecumenical movement: "unity of the Church" and "renewal," defined by the WCC as "the prophetic task of the Church to be God's witness to the world." See *The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*, Faith and Order Paper 151 (Geneva: WCC, 1990).

God. This kind of eucharistic theology makes “excessive anthropological, pneumatological and regenerationist demands,”³⁹ leaving little room for a more dynamic understanding of the new birth or regeneration by the Spirit. Further, as already noted, when the Lord’s Supper is viewed primarily as an act of confession, then the eucharistic understanding becomes increasingly immanent and anthropomorphic. The Dutch Mennonite response illustrates what John Rempel articulated in his study of the eucharistic theology of early Anabaptists:

In current Mennonite writing and practice, nothing is said about God’s action in the event [. . .] nothing is said of his presence.⁴⁰

The response relativizes the importance of metaphysical conceptualization and reduces the Eucharist to an expression of the congregational commitment to peace. This results in eucharistic deism. Mystical notions of God’s presence, whether in a Christological or a pneumatological mode, are overshadowed by ethical notions of the responsibility to be a messianic city on a mountain and an alternative society in the world.

Response to *BEM* and 20th-Century Mennonite Theology

By interpreting the Lord’s Supper as an act of confession, the Dutch Mennonite response to *BEM* was a reflection of its time. Underscoring the ethical implications of the Supper in an almost secular frame of political and social engagement was consistent with the theological currents flowing among Mennonites in the 1980s.⁴¹ According to Paul Martens, 20th-century Mennonite theology had become focused on defining Mennonite identity by boldly contrasting it to other denominational identities.⁴² In articulating a commitment to societal issues while maintaining a radically Christian alternative, Mennonite theologians increasingly stressed discipleship as an ethical commitment. The quest for identity had an apologetic, even polemical, character: Mennonites defined their identity as radically separate, taking

³⁹ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 394.

⁴⁰ Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism*, 225.

⁴¹ C. Arnold Snyder, “Mysticism and the Shape of Anabaptist Spirituality,” in C. Arnold Snyder, ed., *Commoners and Community: Essays in Honour of Werner O. Packull* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2002).

⁴² Paul Martens, “How Mennonite Theology became Superfluous in Three Easy Steps: Bender, Yoder, Weaver,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 33 (2015): 149-66.

ethics as their identity marker over against mystical notions of Christian discipleship regarded as “catholic.”⁴³ This demarcated identity meant a preoccupation with the immanent, anthropological, and ecclesiological dimensions of sacramental theology. The tendency was to interpret the sacraments as outward signs of an eschatological, alternative sociability.⁴⁴ The Dutch response to *BEM* is a revealing illustration of this line of thought.

III

SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY BEYOND *BEM*: GOD’S INVOLVEMENT IN THE EUCHARIST

In conclusion, I will sketch how sacramental theology has developed since *BEM* was published in 1983 to show how sacramentality became attached to not only the eucharistic elements of bread and wine, but the dynamics between all the aspects of the ritual—material, kinetic, and spiritual—and led to further convergence across denominational borders. In discussing the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (CFMP),⁴⁵ I suggest that there are signs of a re-evaluation of sacramentality in the Mennonite view of the Lord’s Supper. This is a constructive development that will help to

⁴³ Ibid., 152. Martens illustrates this tendency, quoting Harold Bender, who asks, “Is Christianity primarily a matter of reception of divine grace through a sacramental-sacerdotal institution (Roman Catholicism), is it chiefly enjoyment of inner experience of grace of God through faith in Christ (Lutheranism), or is it most of all the transformation of life through discipleship (Anabaptism)?” Bender states that “The Anabaptists were neither institutionalists, mystics nor pietists, for they laid the weight of their emphasis upon following Christ in life.” See Harold Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1960), 22.

⁴⁴ Friesen, *Artists, Citizens Philosophers*, 145-49. John Howard Yoder, a significant voice in 20th-century Mennonite theology, was typical in this regard: see John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 44; John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001); and John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984, 2001), 93-94. For a critical discussion of Yoder’s sacramental theology, see Paul Martens, *The Heterodox Yoder* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 134-37. While Yoder’s influence on the Dutch response to *BEM* is obvious, reflected in its similar motives and patterns, his oeuvre is compromised by his personal ethical conduct. We should continue to engage Yoder’s written work, but in the context of his whole legacy.

⁴⁵ <http://mennoniteusa.org/confession-of-faith/>

articulate more clearly God's presence within the Supper.

Beyond Denominational Entrenchment

BEM was a result of decades of dialogue (locally, nationally, and internationally) that led to a cross-pollination of theological traditions. Meanwhile, academic theology and ecumenical dialogue were also influencing the denominations. *BEM* was a report on a growing convergence, and although it was an unsatisfying compromise for several WCC members,⁴⁶ it catalyzed further constructive theological discourse.⁴⁷ For instance, Catholics and Protestants alike are now exploring similar routes to interpret the Eucharist from the standpoint of its full ritual dynamics instead of primarily on the basis of theological, ontological essences.⁴⁸ Ecumenical dialogue reveals how sacramentality becomes attached to the whole ritual dynamic of the Lord's Supper. For example, Catholic eucharistic theology attaches the sacramentality of the Eucharist not merely to the priestly consecration of the bread and wine but to the whole dynamic of God, priest, and congregation.⁴⁹ In this sense, there is a richer understanding of sacramentality across denominational boundaries, whereby the Eucharist in its full performativity becomes a medium for a focused encounter of God and people.⁵⁰

The sacramental theology of *BEM* made its mark on Mennonite

⁴⁶ Erin M. Brigham, *Sustaining the Hope for Unity: Ecumenical Dialogue in a Postmodern World* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 104-105.

⁴⁷ Sattler, "Sacrament," 799-800.

⁴⁸ This can be seen in the work of several theological scholars across denominational borders. A Catholic example is Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*; a Lutheran example is Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, & Resurrection* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2007), 5. An example from a Mennonite perspective is Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 205-207.

⁴⁹ For a current exposition of the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist within dialogue with Mennonites, see Fernando Enns and Jonathan Seiling, eds., *Mennonites in Dialogue: Official Reports from International and National Ecumenical Encounters 1975-2012* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 77, 81.

⁵⁰ Chauvet helpfully calls it a "symbolic exchange." See Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 99-109.

thinking too, at least within North American Mennonite discourse on the Lord's Supper. As Joel Z. Schmidt has shown, *BEM* played a role in the draft of CFMP (1995), in regard to the issue of the Supper as a meal of remembrance.⁵¹ Acknowledgement that remembrance in the biblical sense (*anamnesis*) is more than an exercise of memory led to a nod of agreement with *BEM*'s sacramental language in the personal notes of the chairman of the drafting committee.⁵² The recognition that remembering in the biblical sense is more like reliving the events—becoming part of everything remembered—led to a formulation that was more sacramental than usual for 20th-century Mennonites. In the wording of Article 12, sacramental notions are clearly evident, as in this statement: “The supper re-presents⁵³ the presence of the risen Christ in the church.” Although using the word “sacrament” is avoided by employing the prevailing word “sign,” the language opens a theological space in which a mystical understanding and experience of Christ's presence can emerge. This possibility is elaborated in the accompanying commentary:

The bread of the Lord's Supper is a sign of Christ's body, and the cup is a sign of the new covenant in his blood (Luke 22:19-20). As Christians eat the bread and drink the cup, they experience Christ's presence in their midst. The Lord's Supper both represents Christ and is a way in which Christ is present again (“re-present”) in the body of believers.

In an indirect but subtle way, *BEM* inspired language that expresses the performative potential of the Supper to “re-present” the risen Christ. Although the word “sacrament” is avoided,⁵⁴ the Confession signifies that the Mennonite understanding is recovering a sense of sacramentality, showing a growing sensitivity that the Supper has a performative strength beyond

⁵¹ *BEM* is mentioned in reference to remembrance in Joel Z. Schmidt, “The Lord's Supper in the 1995 Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective: Re-presenting the Body of Christ,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 81 (July 2007): 351-69.

⁵² *Ibid.*, particularly 366-68.

⁵³ Hyphen intended. In the Dutch translation the hyphen was omitted. See Sjouke Voolstra, ed., *Christelijk belijden in dopers perspectief. Een vertaling* (Amsterdam: Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit, 1997), 51, 52.

⁵⁴ Similar to the Swiss, who in a dialogue with Lutherans stated they were “increasingly prepared to recognize what ‘sacrament’ means, without including this term in their common speech.” See Enns and Seiling, *Mennonites in Dialogue*, 150.

human acts of confession or memorialization. A sense of transcendence is being recovered that was lost in the Dutch Mennonite response to *BEM*.

Sacramentality and Transcendence in a Post-Christian, Post-secular Context

Systematic theology is a highly contextual enterprise. Within the ecumenical context of the 1980s, Mennonites found it necessary to re-identify with the early Anabaptists' struggle against an overly mystified theology of the Eucharist, thereby defining their identity as a church that put ethics first. But thirty-five years later and outside the context of polemics with other denominations, I find myself writing in a context of rigorous secularism in Western Europe that has taken its toll on Mennonites and other confessional denominations. At the same time, the paradigm of post-secularism permits not only desacralization but also re-sacralization—a rekindling of the awareness that life is sacred and given instead of self-made. Within a post-secular scheme, transcendence and immanence are not opposing but closely related dimensions.⁵⁵ Embedded in a highly secularized post-Christian culture, the walls of the Dutch Mennonite churches are highly permeable in relation to the prevailing spiritual and intellectual environment. In my view, a radical non-sacramental understanding is not sufficient to articulate experiences of transcendence in the Lord's Supper. Indeed, the non-sacramental scheme of eucharistic deism fosters only a sense of anthropomorphic immanence and further stimulates the flat, empty secularism that is daily imposed on us and that we bring embodied to the Supper table.

In this essay, I have tried to show that there are at least two streams of sacramental theology within the historical Anabaptist tradition. The impression might be that the sacramental deconstruction à la Hubmaier and

⁵⁵ See Conor Sweeney, *Sacramental Presence after Heidegger: Onto-theology, Sacraments, and the Mother's Smile* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 75, 122; David Brown, "A Sacramental World: Why It Matters," in Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), 603-13; Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2010), 85-87, 94-95, 99-100; and L. Boeve, "Thinking Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context: A Playground for Theological Renewal," in L. Boeve and Lambert Leijessen, eds., *Thinking Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context* (Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press; Sterling, VA: Peeters, 2001), 20-23.

Marpeck, and Simons's mystical re-construction of the sacrament, are two opposite positions, with Hubmaier reducing the Supper to an immanent sharing in which Christ is remembered but metaphysically absent, and Marpeck and Simons pointing to a ritual exchange in which there is a transcendent presence that is "real, living and active." However, in a worldview in which transcendence and immanence are no longer considered only as strict opposites, it would be fruitful to view these seemingly conflicting historical perspectives as standing in a dialectic relationship. Doing so could assist contemporary efforts to go beyond a dichotomy between transcendence and immanence and to explore the creative space between eucharistic deism and sacramentalism.

However, without sacramental language, it will be increasingly hard to conceptualize God's involvement with our earthly reality, since it is this language that traditionally captures the closeness of heaven and earth, and the transformative power of the sacred over the profane. Writing in a post-secular context, I believe the signs of a Mennonite re-evaluation of sacramental language and concepts are promising and encouraging. This re-evaluation will open creative possibilities for Mennonite theologians to engage in a dialogue on sacramentality with scholars beyond denominational borders.

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